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## About the development of the Brescian wheellock in the last decades of the 16th century<sup>1</sup>

*By Paolo De Montis*

### Introduction

One of Marco Morin's most important contributions to hoplological literature was certainly his research into the German origin of the wheellock system, research often in conflict with the studies of another eminent scholar, Claude Blair, according to whom the wheellock system was first created in Italy.<sup>2</sup> The dating of the sources found by the two scholars – with the German sources older than the Italian ones – has certainly tipped the scale in favour of Morin's thesis. Morin also reports a series of Italian sources, in particular the Venetian ones dated around the 16<sup>th</sup> century, in which wheellock arms are mentioned to be prohibited objects in the Italian states, while in other territories of the Holy Roman Empire they were generally allowed.<sup>3</sup> There is no mention of such arms' manufacturing, at least as far as it concerns the retrieved documents.

The legislation of the Italian states became more permissive regarding the firearm carrying license only in the last decades of the century.<sup>4</sup> Considering the above, one should also keep in mind the low number of 16<sup>th</sup> century's wheellock guns ascribable, with full certainty, to Italian craftsmen rather than German ones. The Italian-manufactured wheellock guns still existing in the museums date back to 1570–80 and they generally carry Nordic-import locks, the so-called *fiamminghe* (transl. Flemish), thus demonstrating a certain production in the Italian territory, although this still depended on imported parts.<sup>5</sup>

From the beginning of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the city and district of Brescia were known to be highly reputable in terms of production of firearms, in particular the production of the famous barrels produced in Val Trompia.<sup>6</sup> Arquebuses and muskets commissions' requests were sent to Brescia from all over Italy and Europe. Everybody wanted arms crafted in Brescia, from the Pope to the Emperor Charles V, from the King of England to the King of France.<sup>7</sup>

The sources do emphasize the Brescian production of military arms, but what about the civil ones? A certain civil arm production is described in sources dating to the 17<sup>th</sup> century, but is it right to assert that such production was already somehow established in the previous century? According to Hayward, "There is plenty of evidence for the large-scale production of service arms in Brescia in the late sixteenth century, and it is well known that superb firearms were made there in the seventeenth century. It seems reasonable to think that fine quality arms must also been made by the Brescian master in the second half of the sixteenth century".<sup>8</sup>